

## How My Life Changed in 1967

By Rev. Estelle David

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In June 1967, I graduated from high school. I started my first paying job, working in a day care for developmentally disabled pre-school age children in Orange. Many of my co-workers were from Newark. In September, my cousin and I were to start Upsala College in East Orange. My cousin from Mound Bayou, Mississippi, moved in with my family. Little did I know that greater life shifts were to occur as a result of activity on July 1967. Newark was on fire. News reports said that Mr. Smith, a cab driver was stopped and had been harassed and beaten by the Newark police and this was reported as the cause that sparked riots.

I know that this was only a part of the problem that ignited the rebellion. There were many negative events in Newark that year that caused the community to explode. Police harassment was a problem, but the problems were more than that. I learned from history that when you make people voiceless and powerless, when they nor their ideas are included in the plans that directly impact their lives and future, violence seems to be the only way to be heard and considered. Newark was a powder keg that exploded.

In the 1960's, Newark was very segregated by ethnicity. The Central Ward was heavily concentrated with African Americans. The North Ward was occupied largely by Italians. The West Ward was occupied by Irish and Italians. The South Ward was occupied mainly by Jews. The East Ward was occupied mainly by a mixture of various European ethnic groups especially from Portugal. I later learned that many came from the same village in Portugal. The East Ward became known as the Ironbound because the residents did not venture beyond the railroad tracks. It is important to note that African Americans did not venture into other areas of the city because they often were met with hostility.

Springfield Avenue was the place to shop for African American's living in the Central Ward, but, there was concern regarding predatory business practices. The Central Ward had poor housing, I heard Fire Chief John Caulfield describe the row housing of that day as a "Fireman's nightmare." I heard stories of families delighted to move into the housing projects because they were safe and made of brick. Although discrimination existed, I remember large manufacturing jobs at Westinghouse, General

Electric, NJ Bell (now Verizon) and others but many jobs were low paying. Although Black police and bus drivers were rare, I do remember finally seeing Black elevator operators at Bambergers' Department store in downtown Newark.

And then there was what many called Urban or "Negro" Removal from land in the Central Ward to build a new medical school. The plan was to take a very large parcel of land in the Central Ward by removing the people living there with little or no compensation or assistance to relocate. There was a ground swell of resistance to the plan. Eventually, the amount of land was reduced for the project. Still there was a neighborhood demolished between South Orange Avenue to West Market Street, Jones Street to Bergen Street. I remember later protesting on those same streets against the building of the Medical School.

Another Urban Removal Project involved the plans to have Irvine Turner Boulevard (formerly Belmont Avenue) be the connecting road for two new highways that were to be built, Route 78 on the south side of Newark and Route 280 on the north side of Newark. Yes, there were families being displaced with these new highways that were viewed to accommodate those in the suburbs to get in and out of Newark fast. Police brutality, poor housing, job discrimination, and political oppression formed a rebellious mood in the people. So, Mr. Smith's incident with the police was the spark that exploded the powder keg in Newark. The community rebelled because they were just sick and tired of the oppressive life they were forced to live.

In 1953, my father, Dr. Edward Verner, opened his medical office on the second floor of the bank that is now 24 Jones Street. In those days, my father made house calls to many of the homes that were in this Central Ward neighborhood. So, we were familiar with the families that lived in that area. My sister, Dr. Edwina Verner and I would accompany my father on calls. It was his way of helping us understand the people he served and were the source of our family's income. More importantly, he wanted to instill in us, two important values: to keep God first in our lives and give back to our community. In my adulthood, I asked my father what was the reason we move to New Jersey. He said that he did not want to raise his family in the segregated South and he heard that Newark was the best Southern city, up North.

During the rebellion, my father was on staff at Martland Hospital (also known as City Hospital). He worked in the Emergency Room throughout the days of the rebellion. He would bring home stories of horror about the innocent people who had been shot by the National Guard. I remember one lady who was shot, not on the street, but in her home. In my later years, I worked with one of the members of the National Guard who was stationed in Newark. He provided an interesting perspective about whom

composed the National Guard in the 1960's. My co-worker reminded me that he was a young suburban white man who avoided the draft and did not want to go to Viet Nam. He and others like him composed the members of the National Guard, at that time. They were young men who were trying to avoid combat and then were assigned to guard the urban streets of Newark. They were not mentally combat ready. In essence, Newark was a predominately Black foreign urban land in comparison to their predominately White suburban/rural life experiences. I summarized that they were afraid of their own shadow. Lord have mercy, if the shadow was a moving Black person.

During the rebellion, sections of Newark were closed for days. Military tanks and soldiers blocked main streets. Even the bus routes were changed because certain Newark streets were closed. I watched news stories of store windows being broke and looting occurring. The African American store owner put "Soul Brother" so that they would not be attacked by the mob. The neighborhood folks knew who had mistreated or overcharged them over the years. I surely wanted to go to what I considered excitement to be there, but, my mother kept a close watch on me. Eventually, my cousin and I were permitted to go downtown to shop for things for school but we saw nothing. My cousin remembers, South Orange Avenue was being guarded by the young Italians from the neighborhood. They were throwing rocks to keep the rebellion from spreading to their neighborhood, in the North Ward. I feared that this hot July summer rebellion, was the beginning of a new Civil War between races.

In fall 1967, I started Upsala College in East Orange. In our freshman orientation, Lydia Wright was the person sitting next to me. Lydia's father was Dr. Nathan Wright, one of the organizers of the 1967 Black Power Conference in Newark. During the next two years, Lydia and I traveled with her father to speaking engagements in the tri state area as he talked and we learned about Black Power and the next steps for our people. Lydia shared photocopied papers with me about Kawaiida and Black Nationalism that Maulana Karenga had written. The concept of Black Nationalism was puzzling to me for a while. But my questions lead to a deeper understanding of cultural and political changes that were needed. So, my first year at college reflected the fight that many Black students were having on their college campuses with the Administration for Black Studies, for Black Student Organizations, and against the draft and the Viet Nam War. These issues that I was fighting for, lead me into wanting to know more about African American history, culture and how I could be a positive contributor to my community in the future. If there was to a Civil War, I wanted to be on the winning side of that war. ###